

August 9, 1967

Dr. Davis B. Bobrow
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Dear Dr. Bobrow:

This letter is in answer to yours of May 8. My reply has been waiting for me to think of something relevant to say.

I do think we are starting to converge on an approach consistent with both of our prejudices. I would be apposed to investing very much in an organization of full time prophets, fearing that their vitality and integrity would soon wither away.

On the other hand, I do see great merit in the workshop mentioned in your letter, and I certainly believe that there are many areas where there is now insufficient communication between natural and social scientists. There are, I think, some outstanding examples of the utility of studies of this sort. Quite a few Presidential commissions come to my mind, and I guess the reply that I am formulating now may have been provoked by the events leading to the appointment of the Kerner commission, which I have to say is not a very impressive body, but may eventually develop an appropriate staff. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement is perhaps a better example of what we might be aiming at, or aiming to improve, but the one I would put ahead of most of the others is the panel on the world food supply recently headed by Ivan Bennett, and working out of the Office of the Science Adviser to the President. In fact, the series of PSAC panel reports do make a fairly respectable library although they do suffer from the usual limitations of this kind of committee operations, a sort of reduction to the least common denominator of initiative and imagination. These committees ordinarily do work under too much pressure, not enough meeting with one another, and the more leisurely context of the workshop you are suggesting would have much to recommend it.

All this is to say that the institutions we have in mind are not totally absent from present day society, and there is indeed a moderately intense colloquy expressed as usefully in publications as it might be in more personal confrontations. The symposia of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences would be very good examples.

Bobrow

I take it that you have something more dramatic in mind. My only reservation is that important problems are so difficult! How do we go about making useful contributions to the problems of civil order.

As a matter of fact, for any concrete problem that you might care to focus on there are undoubtedly are some few dozen or even hundred people who might have something useful to contribute, and whose insights could be sharpened up against one another. But by and large, I think we ought to select such people according to the chosen problem, and not the other way round.

Let me throw the ball back to you. I am enclosing a "Science and Man" column that I decided not to publish for the time being. It surely does state several problems that might be within the province of the kind of workshop that you have in mind. Techniques for social restraint with minimum violence certainly need a high priority of technical thinking. Possibly even more important, how to break the vicious cycle of injury, threat, and aggression, both in the domestic and international arenas.

I am happy to note that the President has appointed a commission to deal with these problems, but I am not very hopeful in view of the political pressures on it and the general quality of its membership that it will distill ultimate wisdom. How about a retort from you?

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics